

**Virginia Board of Education  
Graduation and Dropout Committee  
January 10, 2007  
12:15 p.m. – 2 p.m.**

**James Monroe Building  
22<sup>nd</sup> Floor – Jefferson Conference Room  
Richmond, Virginia**

**Committee Members Present:** Mr. Andrew J. Rotherham, Co-Chair; Dr. Ella P. Ward, Co-Chair; Dr. Mark E. Emblidge; Dr. Thomas M. Brewster; Mrs. Isis M. Castro; Mr. David L. Johnson; Mr. Kelvin A. Moore; Mrs. Eleanor B. Saslaw; and Dr. Patricia Wright.

**Purpose of Meeting:** To hear different perspectives and examine factors related to why students drop out of high school.

**Summary of Committee Meeting:**

1. Mr. Rotherham and Dr. Ward opened the meeting and described the agenda.
2. Ms. Karen Burke Morison, senior vice president, Civic Enterprises, LLC, provided an overview of her national study on dropouts, entitled, *The Silent Epidemic*. An outline of Ms. Morison's remarks is as follows:

**Why Students Drop  
Out of School**  
*A Presentation to the  
Virginia Board of Education  
Graduation and Dropout Committee  
Karen Burke Morison*

The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts is a *Report by Civic Enterprises, LLC, John M. Bridgeland, John J. DiIulio, Jr., Karen Burke Morison*

Survey Methodology

- Peter D. Hart Research Associates
- Focus Groups in August 2005
- Two in Philadelphia
- Two in Baltimore
- Face to face interviews
- 467 ethnically and racially diverse students ages 16 through 25 who had dropped out of high schools in 25 different locations in large cities, suburbs and small towns.
- Areas with high dropout rates were selected.
- Data is not meant to be nationally representative, but does offer reflections from a broad cross-section of people most affected by the dropout problem.

### High School Dropout Epidemic

- Each year, almost one third of all public high school students fails to graduate with their class.
- Nationwide graduation rate is between 68 to 71 percent.
- Graduation rates for Whites and Asians: 75 to 77 percent.
- About half of blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans fail to graduate.
- A plurality of students drop out with less than two years to go before graduation.

### Two Problems:

First: Data that is faulty.

States: New Unified Graduation Rate formula which takes into account dropouts from 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Second, lack of knowledge about what causes kids to drop out and how to prevent it.

### Dramatic Consequences of Dropping Out

- Dropouts more likely to be:
  - Unemployed
  - Living in Poverty
  - Receiving Welfare
  - Have children who drop out
  - In prison, On death row
  - Unhealthy, Die Sooner
- Dropouts earn about \$1 million less over their lifetimes than those who graduated from college.
- The picture has gotten worse. The median earnings of families headed by a dropout declined by nearly one third between 1974 and 2004.

### Students Claim High Aspirations

- Almost every elementary and middle school student reports ambitions that include high school graduation and at least some college.
- A poll released by MTV and the National Governors Association in 2005 found that 87% of all young people want to go on to college.
- So why do so many drop out?

### Key Findings

- 88% had passing grades, with 62 percent having Cs and above
- 58% dropped out with just two years or less to complete high school
- 66% would have worked harder if expectations were higher
- 70% were confident they could have graduated
- 81% recognized graduating was vital to their success
- Hindsight: 74% would stay in school if had to do it over again
- Kids had high expectations for themselves, and extreme regrets about not graduating
- Who to Blame? 51% blamed themselves for not staying, with an additional 26% sharing the blame with the schools – very few blamed schools alone
- Nearly all had thoughtful ideas about what schools could have done to keep them from dropping out

### Survey Findings

- Top reasons:
- Classes were not interesting.*
- Missed too many classes, could not catch up.*
- Spent too much time with people not interested in school.*
- Felt a lack of connection to the school.*
- Had too much freedom, not enough rules.*
- Academic challenges*
- The weight of real world events*

#### When They Lost Interest

- Started to lose interest in:
  - 9th grade
  - 10th grade
  - 11th grade
  - 12th grade
- Dropped out in:
  - 9th grade
  - 10th grade
  - 11th grade
  - 12th grade

#### Home Situation and Parents' Role

#### Preparedness and Performance

#### Dropouts Did Not Feel Motivated Or Inspired To Work Hard

Did you feel motivated and inspired to work hard in high school?

#### How Dropouts Say Schools Failed

##### In Their Words

- Again and again, students recounted how high school was “*boring, nothing I was interested in,*” or “*it was boring, ...the teacher just stood in front of the room and just talked and didn’t really like involve you.*”
- A girl from Baltimore said, “*There wasn’t any learning going on.*”
- One boy from Philadelphia reflected, “*The work wasn’t even hard....Once I figured I wasn’t going to get any learning done in there, there wasn’t any need to go.*”
- Many students blamed their teachers for feeling the same way they did about their classes – “*They only care about getting through their day, too.*”

#### Teachers and Staff Are Doing Well, But Could Be Doing More

#### Some Failing In School

- 35% said this was one of the reasons they dropped out.
- Failing school is often more highly ranked in national surveys.
- 3 in 10 said they could not keep up with their schoolwork.
- 43% said they missed too many days in school and could not catch up.

#### Schools' Performance: Poor

- 57% said it was difficult to pass from one grade to the next and that the high school’s requirements for graduating were too difficult.

- They attributed this to: teachers not being available to give them extra help; uninteresting classes; tests being too difficult, and absences which put them too far behind.
  - 32% had repeated a grade.
  - 29% expressed significant doubts that they could have met their high school's requirements for graduation, even if they had put forth the necessary effort.
- Too Much Freedom
- 38% of respondents said they had too much freedom and not enough rules in their high school.
  - Lack of order, discipline and rules; making sure students attended class; and limiting chaos that made students feel unsafe.
  - "Once you get in high school, it's more like you have more freedom. In middle school, you have to go to your next class or they are going to get you. In high school, if you don't go to class, there isn't anybody who is going to get you. You just do your own thing."*
  - Male focus group member, Philadelphia

#### Real World Reasons, and the Lure of the Street

- 32% said they had to get a job and make money.
- 36% of young men
- 28% of young women
- They wanted freedom or money right then, or they gave up on their dreams because graduation seemed far away.

#### Parents Engaged Too Late

- 47% say their parents' work schedules kept them from keeping up with what was happening at school.
- Majority of parents were "not aware" or just "somewhat aware" of their child's grades or that they were about to leave school.
- 68% say their parents got more involved when they became aware their child was on the verge of leaving school
- Impetus for parental involvement often related to discipline.
- Only 47% said their parents would be contacted by the school if they were absent.

#### Focus Group Comments

- Two responses were typical of what we heard in Philadelphia and Baltimore: *"There's only so much [the school] can do. It's a job. They're only there to teach. If I'm not willing to learn, if I'm not willing to go, then I've got to put the blame on me. They're there. I'm not."*
- Another dropout said, *"No matter what the circumstances are no matter how bad I thought the school was, it was my choice to leave."*
- A former student from Philadelphia who was asked to grade the performance of his school said, *"I actually gave my school an 'A' because it wasn't them. It was me. So I can't pass blame on them for something I didn't do."*

Majority Say Requirements For Graduating Were Difficult  
But Most Dropouts Confident They Could Have Graduated

#### What Might Help Students Stay in School

While there are no simple solutions to the dropout crisis, there are clearly "supports" that could be provided to improve students' chance of staying in school. While most dropouts blame themselves for failing to graduate, there are things they say schools can do to help them finish.

### What to Look For: Warning Signs

- Dropping out of school isn't a sudden act, but a slow process of disengagement -- academic and social
- There are plenty of warning signs for schools -- triggers that are easy to recognize: absenteeism, tardiness, low grades, discipline problems, transfer students, being held back a grade or more, and 9th grade itself is a vulnerable transition year.
- National studies show that such warning signs appear and can be predictive of dropping out as early as elementary school.

### More Warning Signs

- For 80 percent of students, we can know with high probability who will drop out.
- Two factors gave 8th graders at least a three-in-four likelihood of dropping out: attending school less than 80 percent of the time, and receiving a failing grade in mathematics, English, or both.
- Gender, race, age, and standardized-test scores do not have "strong predictive power" for attendance or course failure.

### Advice From the Dropouts

- Improved Instruction and Support for Struggling Students
- 81% wanted better teachers
- Three-fourths wanted smaller classes with more individualized instruction
- 70% believed that more after-school tutoring, Saturday school, summer school and extra help from teachers would have enhanced their chances of staying in school.

### Advice: School Climate

- Build a School Climate that Fosters Academics and is Safe
- 70% favored increasing supervision in school.
- Focus group: *"The teachers....staff and security were all scared of the students. They let the students do whatever they wanted. The students ran the school. The principal was even scared of them. They didn't care that no work was getting done or anything."*
- *"I just didn't feel safe. [It affected my schoolwork] terrible, because you're always looking around [to see if someone would] come in my classroom and do something to me."*

### Advice

- Ensure Strong Adult-Student Relationships Within the School
- Focus groups said some of their best days were when their teachers noticed them, got them involved in class, and told them they were doing well.
- One boy from Philadelphia said, *"The best day in school? I guess one of the days when I went to every class."*

### Advice: Better School - Parent Communication

- 71% of dropouts surveyed said that one of the keys to keeping students in school was better communication between parents and the schools.
- Less than half said their school contacted their parents or themselves when they were absent (47%) or when they dropped out (48%).

### The Silent Epidemic: *Perspectives of High School Dropouts*

➤ Shares the perspectives of high school dropouts from across the country, who they are, why they dropped out, and what might have helped them graduate.

➤ Provides strong indications that this problem is solvable. We believe the vast majority of young people who drop out can go on to graduate if given appropriate help.

➤Provides some policy pathways grounded in the reality of what would help the students.

#### Policy Pathways

- Offer different schools/class experiences for different students
- Create Early Warning Systems
- Engage parents in school with individualized graduation plans
- Mobilize adult advocates to get the kids the support they need – literacy programs, mentoring, tutoring, after-school help, school and peer counseling

#### Policy Pathways

- Re-examine Compulsory School Age requirements
    - Majority of states allow you to drop out at 16 or 17
  - Accurate graduation rate data needed.
  - Make sure laws don't give principals an incentive to "push out" kids whose test scores would bring down school averages. Graduation rates – using the accurate data – must be an accountability tool.
  - Conduct high quality research and disseminate Best Practices
- NCLB and Graduation Rates
- Accountability, sort of.....
  - NCLB defines the high school graduation rate as the "percentage of students, measured from the beginning of high school, who graduate from high school with a regular diploma (not including an alternative degree that is not fully aligned with the State's academic standards, such as a certificate or a GED) in the standard number of years."
  - Federal regulations, however, allow states substantial flexibility over the specifics of graduation accountability. This includes
    - choosing a formula for calculating graduation rates,*
    - setting goals for graduation rates, and*
    - establishing targets for improvement over time.*

#### We Need A National Conversation On This Topic

Many of life's failures are men who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up. - Thomas Edison

3. Ms. Angela Ciolfi, Powell Fellow, JustChildren Program, Legal Aid Justice Center, provided a presentation on her analysis of dropouts and graduation rates in Virginia. An outline of Ms. Ciolfi's remarks are as follows:

Out of Sight: High School Dropouts in Virginia  
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Legal Aid Justice Center  
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### The Good News

- Future dropouts follow identifiable patterns of performance and behavior.
- Therefore, we can identify them BEFORE they drop out,
- And we can create systems of support and accountability that will increase graduation rates.

### More Good News

- Young people are “keen economists”: 80% of 10<sup>th</sup> graders want to earn a bachelor’s degree or higher.<sup>1</sup>
- They are also persistent: 60% of dropouts earn a GED w/in 12 years of starting high school.<sup>2</sup>
- We must close the gap between high aspirations and low attainment.

<sup>1</sup>Roderick, Melissa. Closing the Aspirations-Attainment Gap. April 2006. Implications for High School Reform: A Commentary from Chicago. New York: MDRC, Inc.

<sup>2</sup>Almeida, Cheryl, Cassius Johnson, and Adria Steinberg. April 2006. Making Good on A Promise: What Policymakers Can Do to Support the Educational Persistence of Dropouts. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.

### The Bad News

- Va. unadjusted completion rates range from 43% to 150%.
- Va NCLB graduation rates ranged from 27% to 100% in 2002.
- In 11 Virginia school divisions, less than 60% of the students complete high school in 4 years.
- Researchers Balfanz and Legters identified 21 U.S. cities where graduation is not the norm. Two Virginia cities made the list.

### Why do students drop out?

- Students’ Social Background
- Students’ Educational Experience
- School Characteristics<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Jerald, Craig D. “Identifying Potential Dropouts: Key Lessons for Building an Early Warning Data System,” Achieve, Inc. June 2006.

Why do students drop out?

#### Students’ Social Background:

- Poverty
- Race
- Gender
- School mobility
- Educational attainment of parents
- Taking on adult responsibilities

#### Students’ Educational Experience:

##### Academic Performance

- Low grades and test scores
- Fs in English and math
- Falling behind in credits

- Being held back at least once

#### Educational Engagement

- High rates of absenteeism, truancy
- Poor classroom behavior
- Less participation in extracurricular activities
- Bad relationships with teachers and peers

#### School Characteristics:

- High enrollment
- Poor interpersonal relationships among students and adults
- Teachers who are less supportive of students
- Unfocused or less rigorous curriculum

#### Why do students drop out?

##### ■Clients' perspective:

Allen is 17. He has been in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade for 3 years. He can barely read, but he has a relative strength in math. His mom has asked the school for extra help with reading, but he is not eligible for special education services and no one is available to spend extra time with him.

Allen is over-age and under-credited. Allen will not make it.

#### Why do students drop out?

##### ■Clients' perspective:

Joseph is 16 and in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. He is always getting in trouble for being disruptive and has been suspended 4 times this year. The school wants to send him to the alternative program for kids with behavioral problems. Joseph sees that his friends at the alternative program are already falling behind. He does not want to go, but he also does not want to stay at the high school where he believes he is not wanted.

#### What do we do about it?

- Develop an early warning system and provide more support to those at-risk
- Provide more academic options
- Re-examine harsh disciplinary measures that lead to loss of instruction
- Enforce truancy laws
- Institute graduation rate accountability
- Conduct a cohort-based, longitudinal study aimed at identifying risk factors for a given school system
- Develop an electronic data system to track individual students
- Intervene early. 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades are key turning points

#### Provide more academic options and support

- Smaller classes and individualized instruction to accommodate different learning styles
- Career and technical programs
- Credit recovery programs
- Example: Multiple Pathways' Transfer Schools (NY)

#### Re-examine disciplinary policies

■In Virginia in 2004-05, only 18% of disciplinary referrals were for serious offenses. Yet 70% of disciplinary referrals resulted in suspension or expulsion.

- Skiba and Edly: attitudes and beliefs of the principal have a significant effect on suspension rates – over and above student demographic factors, and
- Schools with lower use of suspension have significantly higher test scores

Enforce truancy laws

- We have good truancy laws in Virginia, but they often go un-enforced by overworked attendance officers and guidance counselors.
- When they are enforced, very little is done prior to a juvenile court referral.
- Read about model truancy prevention:  
[www.abanet.org/crimjust/juvjus/truancypreventionprograms.doc](http://www.abanet.org/crimjust/juvjus/truancypreventionprograms.doc)  
 Institute graduation rate accountability
- Require schools to meet reasonable graduation rate targets within each student subgroup as part of school accreditation
- Example: Louisiana's accountability model

4. Mr. Albert Ciarochi, principal, Highland Springs High School, Henrico County; Mr. Martin Ringstaff, principal, Dan River High School, Pittsylvania County; and Mrs. Cynthia Watson, principal, Booker T. Washington High School, Norfolk, participated in a panel discussion and answered questions on their perspectives on the causes of dropouts in their high schools.
5. Mr. Rotherham and Dr. Ward provided closing remarks.